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Defending the right to work: the 1983 Timex workers' occupation in Dundee

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Abstract

In January 1983 the US-owned multinational Timex, a prominent employer in Dundee since 1946, announced it would cease production of mechanical wrist watches in the city. Substantial redundancies would accompany closure of the Milton of Craigie production unit where 2,000 mainly male skilled engineers and tool makers were employed. About 2,000 mainly female assembly-line workers would be retained at another factory in the city, at Camperdown, as Timex completed its diversification into subcontracting work in electronics. With this announcement Timex violated the workforce's moral economy. Significant changes were only permissible where negotiated with union representatives and the security of those affected was preserved. Capital was leaving Dundee, despite the firm's receipt of many grants from national and local government. On 8 April Milton workers resisted compulsory redundancy by occupying their plant. Timex was not stopped from ending watch-making, but the averted compulsory redundancies and preserved union voice. Those who wished were transferred to Camperdown. The occupation was a crucial episode in Dundee's deindustrialization, but has been obscured in popular memory by the bitter dispute accompanying the firm's final departure from the city in 1993.

KEYWORDS: moral economy, workers' rights, deindustrialization

On 8 April 1983 workers occupied the Timex engineering plant at Milton of Craigie in east Dundee.¹ They were resisting the company's decision, announced three months earlier, to stop producing mechanical watches in Dundee. The occupiers claimed that Timex was transferring watch-making and other activities to Besançon in France. For Timex this was consolidation of its strategic diversification in Dundee from watches to electronics. This had commenced in the early 1970s with production of polaroid and then Nimslo 3-D cameras. By the early 1980s Timex in Dundee was producing the ZX Spectrum, one of the first home computers, and tubes for early flat-screen pocket televisions, for inventor-entrepreneur Clive Sinclair. For the workers ending watch-making meant the loss of *their* product – the mechanical watches – and forfeiture of skilled employment. The occupation was a fight for the right to work, made urgent by the acceleration of deindustrialization locally and nationally. In the course of the six-week occupation it became clear that watch-making could not be preserved. Those involved shifted their goal to protecting union voice and securing improved exit terms: enhanced compensation for redundancy and redeployment to positions in Timex's assembly unit at Camperdown, several miles from Milton in north-west Dundee.

This article situates the 1983 occupation of Milton in the working-class moral economy of deindustrialization which developed in Scotland after the Second World War. This resembled the 'Thompsonian' moral economy of the eighteenth-century English 'crowd', being composed of customs and expectations that evolved over time.² In Scotland this working-class moral economy had two central components: the preservation of communal security through collective action, with assistance where necessary from policy-makers; and the agreement of the workers and communities affected as pre-condition of significant industrial change. Multinational companies, of which Timex was one of several in Dundee, were encouraged to invest in Scotland through state loans and grants. The growth of multinational employment stalled from the late 1960s, however, and was no longer sufficient to absorb workers made redundant by the contraction of older sectors.³ The Labour governments in the 1960s and 1970s managed this process carefully, preserving working-class security through renewed investment in coal mining and shipbuilding, and occasional high-profile interventions to protect private-sector operators. The 'rescue' of the Chrysler car plant at Linwood in 1975-76 was a notable example. The Conservative government elected in 1979 managed the process differently. Deindustrialization accelerated rapidly with no meaningful attempt to stimulate

¹ Research for this article was conducted with the support of the Leverhulme Trust, RPG-2016-283.

² E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136.

³ Neil Hood and Stephen Young, *Multinationals in Retreat: the Scottish Experience* (Edinburgh, 1982).

alternative employment.⁴ This change had profound consequences for communities reliant on industrial manufacturing, both in traditional and 'new' industries.⁵

The articles in this special edition of *Labour History Review* show how various groups of workers in these communities made sense of the insecurities they encountered in this new political and economic environment. At Timex, as elsewhere in Scotland, the Milton workers viewed their redundancy as unjust in moral economy terms. Their reasoning and action prefigured the resistance to closure and capital flight by workers at the high-profile Caterpillar earthmoving equipment factory in Lanarkshire in 1987.⁶ Ewan Gibbs and one of the authors here recently examined the Caterpillar occupation by framing it as an episode of deindustrialization, which is supplemented by a closer analysis of the dispute's heritage and legacy in this collection.⁷ The Milton workers in 1983 pioneered moral-economy opposition to a major US-owned multinational that flouted its obligations to the local and national community by moving production offshore. This type of redundancy represented a distinct order of economic injustice, different from closure arising from a company folding in the face of competitive pressures.⁸ Timex had accepted public money over many years to support its development and performance and leant heavily on workforce expertise when moving into electronics production. Milton workers duly saw Timex as stealing public assets from the people of Dundee and Scotland, to deploy these elsewhere in pursuit of greater but illegitimate profitability.

The analysis draws on: local and national press reports; oral history testimony, with author interviews accompanied by testimonies compiled by Mona Bozdog, whose help we gratefully acknowledge here, within the Generation ZX (X) Project at Abertay University;⁹ and varied government, business and trade-union archive materials, including those collected by the Timex History Group which meets at Douglas Community Centre, a mile or so from the site of the former Milton factory, now an Asda superstore. This group consists largely of former Timex engineers, all men, who provided one of the authors with a warm welcome and tea-break blether on several

⁴ Jim Tomlinson, Interview with Gavin McCrone, Edinburgh, March 2018; Jim Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Narratives of Economic Life in Britain from Beveridge to Brexit* (Oxford, 2017), 137-160.

⁵ Jim Phillips, Valerie Wright and Jim Tomlinson, 'Deindustrialization, the Linwood Car Plant and Scotland's Political Divergence from England in the 1960s and 1970s', *Twentieth-Century British History*, 30, 3 (2019), 399-423.

⁶ Charles Woolfson and John Foster, *Track Record: the Story of the Caterpillar Occupation* (London, 1988).

⁷ Ewan Gibbs and Jim Phillips, 'Who owns a factory?: Caterpillar tractors in Uddingston, 1956-1987', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 39 (2018), 111-137.

⁸ Jim Tomlinson, Jim Phillips and Valerie Wright, 'De-industrialization: a Case Study of Dundee, 1951-2001, and its Broad Implications', *Business History*, published online 26 December 2019, DOI: 10.1080/00076791.2019.1676235.

⁹ <https://www.abertay.ac.uk/news/2018/generation-zx-x-to-celebrate-women-of-timex>, accessed 17 January 2020.

occasions. The article is structured in two halves. The first examines the longer history of Timex in Dundee, establishing how the moral economy of the Milton workforce was constructed from the 1950s to the 1970s and then transgressed by Timex in 1983. The second half analyses the occupation and its position in popular memory. It shows how the Milton workers defended the moral economy and explains how the occupation has been overshadowed by the acrimonious industrial dispute in 1993 which accompanied Timex's ultimate departure from Dundee.

Timex and the Moral Economy

Timex arrived in Dundee in 1946 within the larger reordering of economic and social life in Scotland and the UK that followed the Second World War. Karl Polanyi's influential work, *The Great Transformation*, published in 1944, advanced a model for understanding this restructuring. The process of industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was accompanied by economic liberalization and social fragmentation, he argued. Economic activity became disengaged from social life and human needs. A 'counter-movement' arose in the late nineteenth century and gathered momentum in the twentieth century, propelled by an array of working-class and bourgeois activists, reformists, trade unionists, socialists and revolutionaries. Policy-making elites were compelled to re-embed economic activity in a denser social fabric with enhanced welfare protection, employment stabilization and wealth redistribution.¹⁰ This 'counter-movement' developed further traction in the late stages and aftermath of the Second World War in the UK. In economic and social policy Winston Churchill's Coalition government was guided by Labour figures, notably Ernest Bevin, founding General Secretary of the Transport & General Workers' Union, but its Conservative members were also motivated by the aim of subverting calls for more egalitarian wealth and power redistribution.¹¹ Hence the 1944 White Paper, *Employment Policy*, which set out the state's moral obligation to protect workers from unemployment so long as they were willing to change jobs and occupations as national priorities shifted.¹²

This was the framework for the employment and industrial policies pursued by Labour as well as Conservative governments from the 1940s to the 1970s. It included a willingness, expressed more strongly under Labour than Conservative governments, to use 'regional policy' grants and loans to establish new industries in Ulster, central Scotland, northern England and southern Wales.

¹⁰ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (London, 1944).

¹¹ Geoffrey G. Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil. The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2011), 79–128, 299–334.

¹² *Employment Policy*, Cmd. 6527 (1944).

This restructuring can be thought of as elite in construction and scope, but it is wise to reflect on Polanyi's model: pressure from below was vital in generating state commitment to the protection of economic security. In Scotland – in the coalfields, the shipyards and the textile towns – such moral economy imperatives became embedded in everyday life from the 1950s onwards. There was an expectation of future prosperity, and an insistence that any changes to economic life jeopardizing existing employment must be preceded by political consultation and only accepted where alternative sources of security were stimulated. This was the working-class moral economy in action. Lost employment in 'traditional' industries in the 1950s and 1960s was tolerated by workers and their representatives precisely and only because policy-makers made provision for alternative jobs in 'new' industries.¹³

'The Timex' grew in Dundee within this social and economic framework.¹⁴ In 1947 some 213 women and 25 men worked at the initial Timex factory at Camperdown industrial estate.¹⁵ By 1951 the number of women employed had more than doubled to 546, while the male labour force had increased to 355.¹⁶ Growth in male employment is explained by the opening of another Dundee factory at Milton of Craigie, four miles east, in 1948 where skilled engineers – attracted mainly from jute and shipbuilding – made tools and components to serve the assembly line at Camperdown. This investment was warranted because Camperdown had proved viable. It also represented a saving on the cost of importing components from the USA. Milton was later extended in 1957 at a cost to the UK Treasury of £25,000 with further expansion in the 1960s. The Timex workforce across the city grew: to 1,549 women and 718 men in 1965; to 2,615 women and 1,216 men by 1967; and peaked eventually in 1974 at around 6,000, women and men combined. Milton products were exported to Timex facilities throughout the world. Two former engineers, Tom Smith and Dave Howie, members of the Timex History Group, remember also repairing machines sent to Milton from Timex units in the USA. These were then returned to the US factories.¹⁷

¹³ Jim Phillips, 'The Moral Economy of Deindustrialization in post-1945 Scotland', in Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Perchard (eds), *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places* (Vancouver, 2017), 313-330.

¹⁴ Most former Timex employees use the definite article: Mona Bozdog, Robert Clark and the women of Timex, *Generation ZX(X)*, <https://www.performingplay.co.uk/audio-1>, accessed 20 January 2020.

¹⁵ The National Archives (TNA), BT 177/928B, Building Project, Scottish Region [Board of Trade stamped received 26 November 1947], erect factory to be occupied by UK Time branch of US Time Corporation, Camperdown.

¹⁶ General Registry Office, Edinburgh, *Census 1951 Scotland. Volume IV Occupations and Industries* (Edinburgh, 1956), Table 13, Industries and Occupied Population aged 15 and over by Place of Work: Scotland, Cities, Counties and Large Burghs.

¹⁷ Valerie Wright and Jim Phillips, Interview with Tom Smith and Dave Howie, Dundee, 3 July 2018.

The spatial development of Timex in Dundee framed a distinct division of labour, bifurcated in terms of gender and skill. Roughly 60 per cent of the Milton work force were male, and 80 per cent of Camperdown workers were female. Most of the supervisory staff at Camperdown were male too, indicating an important parallel with the jute industry, Dundee's predominant manufacturing sector prior to the Second World War.¹⁸ While it is questionable that the assembly-line work at Camperdown was indeed 'unskilled', requiring high levels of manual dexterity and attention to detail, it was categorized thus and involved substantial single task repetition. Such gendered distinctions between women's and men's work, blurring objective dimensions of skill, have a long history, which was consolidated by the 'Fordist' practices of mass-production firms like Timex.¹⁹ The firm's employees were comparatively well paid in Dundee. Skilled men at Milton who joined directly from the jute industry doubled their earnings in the 1960s and could increase their wages further by moving – or threatening to move – to National Cash Register (NCR), another US company established in Dundee after the Second World War. Timex and 'the Cash' negotiated their annual wage agreements six months apart. Those who switched could therefore attain two pay increases in the same twelve-month period. Many workers nevertheless chose to remain continuously at Timex. They felt Timex materials and equipment were superior, they liked the working environment and there were opportunities for training and advancement.²⁰ In addition, as Tom and Dave explain, they formed strong friendships in the toolroom:

Jim: But you knew people who worked in the other factories who worked in NCR perhaps and similar jobs, or...? Have you much contact...? I mean...

Tom: Oh yeah, there was, there was quite a movement between the, the Timex and the Cash because, er, the wage negotiations were at different times. So if they went up, people moved back and forward then they moved up, they just kept climbing.

Valerie: And was it similar work?

Tom: The very same.

Valerie: Were you ever tempted to go over to NCR?

¹⁸ Bill Knox and Alan McKinlay, 'The Union Makes us Strong? Work and Trade Unionism in Timex, 1946-83', in Jim Tomlinson and Christopher A. Whatley (eds), *Jute No More: Transforming Dundee* (Dundee, 2011), 266-290.

¹⁹ Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work, 1700 to the present* (London, 1998), 26.

²⁰ Jim Phillips note of tea-break conversation with Timex History Group, Dundee, 16 August 2017.

Tom: No, no because the company, I thought the company and the toolroom, you'd made friends then that I'm still friendly wi. I mean like, what is this? This is Tuesday? I'll meet them tomorrow afternoon for a couple of pints. So ...

Valerie: So that was more important to you than any extra money.

Dave: Uh-huh.

Tom: Yeah.

Valerie: But you knew it'd be made up again, almost like your...

Tom: I mean you were maybe going for what...?

Dave: A couple of pounds. Is it worth all the hassle? And, and you were settled.

Tom: Aye.

Dave: You were in good company. The work was okay. It was, and you're looking at, erm, you're thinking you're going to be there for the foreseeable. And if you go into some place else, you're last in so if anything did happen ...

Tom: You're first oot.

Dave: ... first oot. So ... Right, well I'm, I'm here. I've been here for X number of years, so ...

Tom: I mean, I'll be honest, if the Timex hadnae closed, I'd probably would have just stayed there till I retired.²¹

The expectation of employment security for those who stayed at Timex was a significant element in the working-class moral economy at Milton. Dave and Tom joined in a decade of expansion, the 1960s, with UK government policy explicitly geared to increasing employment and production in consumer durables. This involved shifting resources out of lower value-added industrial staples: coal, metals, ships, locomotives and textiles.²² In Dundee the expansion of watch-making at Timex was accompanied by a corresponding contraction of jute and shipbuilding. These established manufacturers opposed the expansion of consumer goods manufacturing in Dundee, in part because employment conditions as well as wages were superior in the new factories. Timex establishments were cleaner, quieter and healthier environments to work in, with superior toilets,

²¹ Interview, Tom and Dave.

²² Department of Economic Affairs, *The National Plan*, Cmnd. 2764 (London, 1965).

washing facilities, lockers and canteens.²³ This transition from ‘old’ to ‘new’ industry reinforced moral economy expectations of improvement among female as well as male workers at Timex, at both Camperdown and Milton. One of these women, interviewed by Mona Bozdog in 2018, remembers:

Eh I suppose at that time it was my job, my life, it was how I ... It was just how you existed. It paid for everything, over the years, such a long time. I would probably would have been there till I retired had the factory had still been open, ye thought ye had a job for life. Never expected it to close.²⁴

These assumptions were compromised slightly by the doubling of unemployment in the 1970s.²⁵ Economic insecurity then deteriorated quickly and substantially after the election of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government in 1979, which allowed unemployment to escalate rapidly while reducing significantly state support for industry. What we now term ‘precarity’ in the workplace rapidly mounted.²⁶ Thatcher’s government heightened ‘market-ness’ in economic life, reversing the Polanyian trend where commercial and industrial activity had been shaped to accommodate social needs. The new approach was careless of working-class security and amounted to a reckless turn in the management of deindustrialization.²⁷ In Dundee the casualties accumulated in the twelve months from November 1981, with 1,212 manufacturing jobs lost through contraction of firms and another 463 as a result of closure. ‘Old’ firms were affected, such as Bonar Textiles, dropping 71 workers in August 1982, along with the ‘new’, Veeder-Root, dispensing 295 in five separate monthly redundancies from May to November 1982.²⁸ At Timex employment drifted downwards to 4,200 in 1982. The firm was nevertheless identified by policy-makers as a potential industrial ‘winner’, worthy of government sponsorship. When addressing the Scottish Conservative Conference at the City Hall in Perth in May 1981, the Prime Minister spoke warmly about Timex. She said it was an example of how industry more broadly was allegedly becoming more competitive

²³ Valerie Wright, ‘Juteopolis and After: Women and Work in Twentieth-Century Dundee’ in Tomlinson and Whatley, *Jute No More*, 132-62.

²⁴ Bozdog, *Generation ZX(X)*, Clip 120.

²⁵ Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy*, 137-160.

²⁶ Gabriella Alberti, Ioulia Bessa, Kate Hardy, Vera Trappman, Charles Umney, ‘In, Against and Beyond Precarity’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 32, 3 (2018), 447-457.

²⁷ Ewan Gibbs, ‘The Moral Economy of the Scottish Coalfields: Managing Deindustrialization under Nationalization, c. 1947-1983’, *Enterprise and Society*, 19, 1 (2018), 124-152.

²⁸ National Records of Scotland (NRS), SEP 4/3574, William MacDougall, Scottish Economic Planning Department (SEPD), Redundancies and Closures – Dundee, 1-11-81 to 31-10-82, 2 November 1982.

under her governance, highlighting the mixed public-private £12 million investment that enabled the manufacture in Dundee of the Nimslo 3D camera, plus the flat-screen tubes forming the core of ‘the first genuinely pocket-sized TV’.²⁹ The key attraction of Timex for the government, in other words, was the movement away from watch-making and into electronics. This represented a closer fit with the government’s ideological agenda, given the prominence of US-owned firms and the sector’s anti-union, individualist culture.³⁰

The beginnings of this transition had been supported in the 1970s by the workforce, including the Milton engineers. New products and techniques were introduced in consultation with workers and their union representatives. This was consistent with the working-class moral economy operating in Timex, privileging joint-industrial dialogue and future employee security. Union organization, initially resisted by the firm, had been won through concerted collective action from the 1950s onwards. Union coverage was concentrated at first among skilled engineers, mainly men, but by the late 1960s, according to the authoritative account by Knox and McKinlay, membership was a precondition of employment in female-dominated assembly production sections also.³¹ Such closed-shop conditions certainly operated at Milton. A strong union culture was reinforced by family ties and tradition. Prominent shop stewards followed their fathers and uncles into work at Milton. The Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) enjoyed an important social role in Timex, as it did in the city more generally. It provided bus transport between Timex factories and housing estates across the city and beyond. The AEU was also closely integrated into politics in the city. The Labour Party unusually had a factory branch at Timex, as did the Communist Party of Great Britain, and a former steward at the firm, Ernie Ross, was elected Labour MP for Dundee West in 1979.³²

This union culture and organization helped Milton engineers exercise substantial control over their working day, but in the winter of 1982-83 Timex management made serious incursions on the moral economy. Union voice was challenged and employment security jeopardized. A change in personnel was important. Barry Lawson, employed as the UK director of manufacturing, arrived in 1981 or 1982 and boasted of ‘happily’ managing production for Phillips Electronics in Chile after Pinochet’s military coup in 1973. This wilfully antagonized trade unionists and socialists in Dundee.³³ It was Lawson’s express aim to establish Timex in Dundee as a ‘successful electronics company’. The

²⁹ Margaret Thatcher Foundation, Speech to Scottish Conservative Party, 8 May 1981, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104644>, accessed 16 January 2019.

³⁰ Alan McKinlay and Bill Knox, ‘Working for the Yankee Dollar. US Inward Investment and Scottish Labour, 1945-1970’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 7 (1999), 1-26

³¹ Knox and McKinlay, ‘The Union Makes us Strong?’, 273-77.

³² Jim Phillips, note of conversation with Timex History Group, 21 June 2017.

³³ Knox and McKinlay, ‘The Union Makes us Strong?’, 266-290.

message was clear: watch-making was unlikely to be retained in the longer term.³⁴ Lawson also attempted to marginalize dialogue with union representatives. This subverted established practice. Workplace tensions increased. A week-long strike in November 1982 was provoked by his suspension of five shop stewards for alleged 'poor performance'.³⁵ The stewards argued that this was part of an anti-union challenge, with management terminating various agreed procedures, notably overtime payments for cleaning machinery at the end of shifts.³⁶ Lawson was asserting his managerial sovereignty of the workplace, to paraphrase the industrial sociology of Alan Fox.³⁷ Management used the strike to rationalize the temporary redundancy of 1,200 component makers in December 1982.³⁸

In January 1983 Timex decided to eradicate these jobs permanently, ending watch-making altogether and closing Milton, because Nimslo had resolved to move the 3D camera to Japan where production costs were an estimated 40 per cent lower. Another 700 jobs would go as a result.³⁹ The camera had been developed with government grants and the ingenuity of the workforce. This heightened the injustice felt at Milton. Ernie Ross argued that Nimslo was 'stealing' the camera from Dundee and Timex was equally culpable in absolving itself of responsibilities to the community and workforce acquired by the receipt of public money.⁴⁰ This argument was made by the Milton stewards, led by their convenor, Gordon Samson.⁴¹ The theft motif was common currency in working-class resistance to contractions and closures in Scotland in the early 1980s where capital was moving plant and products to lower-cost factories offshore.⁴² It was likewise articulated by Milton workers in relation to the transfer of watch-making to France. Timex denied this charge, claiming that its Besançon operation was simply fulfilling an existing production schedule, but the Milton engineers and their supporters insisted that their intellectual and moral property was being illegitimately exported, without due acknowledgment or compensation.⁴³

³⁴ NRS, SEP 4/4064, J. Laydon, SEPD, note of visit to Timex on 4 February 1983.

³⁵ NRS, SEP 4/3574, clipping, *Courier & Advertiser* (hereafter *Courier*), 10 November 1982.

³⁶ NRS, SEP 4/3574, clipping, John McKinlay, 'The time ticks away for Dundee', *Glasgow Herald*, 17 November 1982.

³⁷ Alan Fox, 'Managerial Ideology and Labour Relations', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 4, 3 (1966), 366-78.

³⁸ *The Scotsman*, 7 December 1982.

³⁹ Kathleen McDermott, *Timex. A Company and its Community, 1854-1998* (Connecticut, 1998), 206-7, 214.

⁴⁰ NRS, SEP 4/5292, miscellaneous SEPD official correspondence relating to questions raised by Ernie Ross about public subsidy of Nimslo, including SEPD note, 24 January 1983.

⁴¹ Timex History Group, Douglas Community Centre (DCC), Elizabeth Bryce Lee, *The Timex Dispute Dundee 1983*, University of Edinburgh Honours Degree in Commerce Dissertation, 1984, 30-34.

⁴² Andy Clark, 'Stealing Our Identity and Taking It over to Ireland': Deindustrialization, Resistance, and Gender in Scotland' in High, MacKinnon and Perchard, *Deindustrialized World*, 331-347.

⁴³ *Courier*, 9 April 1983.

Lawson planned to concentrate activity at Camperdown, with production of circuit boards, electronic components and the ZX Spectrum. This was a vital point of departure. Jean, a former employee at Camperdown, remembers:

It was separate factories, even though it was Timex, it was like ... we never knew anybody there unless you knew them outside. And the ... the two factories were totally ... they were at different ends of the town as well ... so [...]. But I'm nae really ... no ... it was just ... we did think it was a shame when they shut it because, I mean, everybody ... it's terrible ... it's tragic when the ... they lose their jobs No matter whether they're men or women. I mean, some of the men only had their income, just like some of the women only had that one income coming in. So you feel for them no matter what side they were on. I mean, even if they're no even in Timex, you still feel for somebody losing their job.⁴⁴

Local Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) representatives attempted to isolate Camperdown workers from the dispute.⁴⁵ This delicate approach survived an apparent attempt by Lawson to end the closed shop at the assembly plant. It emerged in March 1983 that a 28-year old electronics production technician, who had started at Camperdown in October 1982, was not paying union subscriptions. Other technicians refused to work alongside him and went on strike, joined the following day by skilled workers from the Camperdown tool room. A total of 70 Camperdown workers were on unofficial strike. Managers responded by laying off 500 workers, a substantial proportion of the plant's 1,200 employees. Harry McLevy of the AUEW characterized the technician as 'a complete opportunist', a free rider seeking the benefits of union membership without joining: 'If you get on the bus you have to pay the fare'. McLevy criticized Timex for abandoning established closed shop practice: where a worker refused union membership he or she was sent home. In this instance the firm had done the opposite, retaining the non-union member while sending home the unionized workers. A company spokesman described the situation as 'very, very serious' and agreed with a journalist's speculative query that the plant could be closed by the end of the week, possibly permanently.⁴⁶ This moral economy skirmish was nevertheless won by the union. The technician

⁴⁴ Valerie Wright, Interview with Jean, Dundee, 8 May 2018.

⁴⁵ The Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) became the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) in 1971.

⁴⁶ *Courier*, 1 April 1983.

came to be persuaded 'to abide by union rules'. This was an important minor victory, preserving the closed shop at Camperdown until the lockout prefiguring Timex's departure in 1993.⁴⁷

The working-class moral economy was more overtly challenged by the threatened closure and redundancies at Milton. Shop stewards and officials from the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) tried to push the firm and the government back. With Gavin Laird, AUEW General Secretary, they met Thatcher in Glasgow on the 28 January 1983, asserting that watch-making could still be viable with the right level of financial support, particularly in research and development of new products. This would strengthen Timex and bolster its position as a high-tech operation with growth potential.⁴⁸ But Thatcher did not believe in 'propping up lame ducks',⁴⁹ and was reluctant to block the free movement of capital. The moral economy claims of the Dundee workers, that the UK government had a duty to protect production and employment in Dundee and Scotland, went unheeded. Alex Fletcher, Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, and the Scottish Office minister responsible for economic and industrial matters, was a consistent critic of trade unions and collective bargaining. Visiting Dundee in November 1982, he told Ernie Ross and a group of Timex stewards that the city's chief 'problem' was the refusal by workers to accept changes in their practices. He claimed these were needed urgently, to attract greater investment.⁵⁰

George Younger, Secretary of State for Scotland, adopted a slightly more emollient approach during the Milton crisis. He persuaded the Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, and the Prime Minister that the government had some obligation to Timex workers. He secured a grant for 22 per cent of the firm's proposed capital diversification costs, with a loan covering around 50 per cent of the balance. This would safeguard the Camperdown plant.⁵¹ Fred Olsen, Timex owner, met a delegation of Milton stewards on 2 February, flown to his old family home in Norway by his private jet from RAF Leuchars for the day. He provided limited details of the diversification plan.⁵² Olsen was in correspondence with Thatcher and accepted the government money, but did not withdraw the redundancies.⁵³ The MP for Dundee East, Gordon Wilson, who was leader of the Scottish National Party, argued that without watches or an alternative own-brand product, Timex would be 'dangerously exposed to the fortunes of the contract engineering industry'.⁵⁴ The intensifying crisis was an obvious

⁴⁷ Dundee Central Libraries, *Courier* clippings file, 17 and 31 March 1983, 1 and 2 April 1983.

⁴⁸ NRS, SEP 4/3575, Michael Scholar to Muir Russell, 31 January 1983.

⁴⁹ Margaret Thatcher, Speech to Conservative Central Council ('The Historic Choice'), 20 March 1976, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/102990>, accessed 16 January 2019.

⁵⁰ NRS, SEP 4/3574, Mr Fletcher's meeting with Ernie Ross MP and delegation, 10 November 1982.

⁵¹ NRS, SEP 4/5292, Younger to Howe, 2 February 1983. David Hencke, 'Timex owner may change attitude', *The Guardian*, 3 February 1983.

⁵² NRS, SEP 4/3575, clipping, *Courier*, 2 February 1983.

⁵³ TNA, PREM 19/1104, Thatcher to Olsen, 16 February 1983.

⁵⁴ TNA, PREM 19/1104, Muir Russell, Scottish Office, to Michael Scholar, 7 February 1983.

embarrassment to the government, given that Thatcher had identified Timex as a success story in Scotland only two years earlier.⁵⁵ Olsen refused to yield. A programme of voluntary redundancy was completed with around 1,700 workers leaving Timex between January and 20 April 1983 which the unions reluctantly accepted. When the company identified the 200 or so remaining at Milton for compulsory redundancy, the conflict grew more acute.⁵⁶

The Occupation

By late March trade union representatives had compiled a dossier of confidential Timex documents, described as a 'highly complex mass of invoices, purchase requisitions, internal memos and detailed plans'.⁵⁷ This was used to support the moral-economy argument that Timex had misled the government as well as the Dundee workforce in denying that watchmaking work had been transferred to France. The AUEW asserted that part of the repair and service section had already been moved, with a loss of 50 jobs in Dundee.⁵⁸ The dossier also included evidence that watch cases scheduled to be produced in Dundee were being imported to Dundee from France. Timex claims about the shrinking market for watches were contested too in the dossier, which carried company memos showing plans for four new analogue models as well as innovative digital products, to be bought from a Korean manufacturer and branded with the Timex logo. These watches could all be manufactured at Dundee, the AUEW stated.⁵⁹

The union dossier strengthened the resolve of 200 workers who were served with 'intimidating' compulsory redundancy notices at the beginning of April 1983. It had been agreed by the workforce and union representatives in January that industrial action would be taken if redundancy was enforced. Now confronting this circumstance, the workers discussed occupation of the Milton plant, especially as the company was not offering 'tried and true' employees the chance to move to Camperdown.⁶⁰ The occupation began at 9 p.m. on 8 April, a Friday night. Gordon Sampson, convenor of the plant's stewards, expressed the action's moral economy dimensions in a statement to the press (Figure 1):

⁵⁵ Margaret Thatcher Foundation, Speech to Scottish Conservative Party, 8 May 1981.

⁵⁶ *Courier*, 21 March 1983.

⁵⁷ *The Scotsman*, 30 March 1983.

⁵⁸ *Courier*, 30 March 1983.

⁵⁹ *Courier*, 30 March and 2 April 1983; *The Scotsman*, 30 March 1983.

⁶⁰ *The Scotsman*, 4 April 1983.



Figure 1: *Courier & Advertiser*, 9 April 1983

For the past three months we have fought to save an industry vital to Britain's needs. We have fought to save the jobs in a city beleaguered with mass unemployment. We have been deserted in the struggle by our own government. We remain here firmly lodged until such time as an acceptable negotiable settlement is won. We are confident that with our own unity and the support of the British labour movement we will win. We will not leave the plant until victory is secured.⁶¹

Sampson indicated the equipment in the factory would not be damaged but 'maintained throughout the sit-in'. Crucially, the Sinclair production line was also under their control and 'would not be relinquished'. This gave the occupiers some leverage over Timex management, which was seeking to fulfil a contract with Sinclair. Jim Torrance of Dundee Trades Council called on the 'the whole community' to provide the occupation with financial and moral support. He emphasized the value of

⁶¹ *Courier*, 9 April 1983.

maintaining watch production in the city, the urgency of providing alternative work, and the importance of retaining 'a highly skilled group of workers with proven ability in research, design and product proving'.⁶²

Press coverage made regular reference 'an army of occupation' at Milton, but the aims of the action were ambiguous. The occupiers did not attempt to keep the plant operating, so this was not a work-in like the struggle to keep shipbuilding on the Upper Clyde in 1971.⁶³ It is also not clear whether the occupiers even believed they could preserve watch production. But two ambitions were abundantly obvious: that the costs to Timex of closing Milton would be maximized, through upping the redundancy terms; and that each of the workers facing redundancy should be offered redeployment to Camperdown. This much became transparent when Sampson moved an emergency resolution at the STUC annual congress in Rothesay one week into the occupation. Sampson made the moral-economy case for Milton. The action was 'against compulsory redundancies and in defence of jobs'. This was about class justice: 'Our fight is our right and the right of every member of the working class, that is the right to work'. Sampson concluded by relating this 'magnificent struggle' in a city 'beleaguered by mass unemployment' to the indifference of the Conservative government which had abandoned the workers. The resolution was passed unanimously. J. Sneddon, its seconder, was a delegate from Monktonhall Colliery in Midlothian. He expressed the value of solidarity across time as well as space, saying that he was returning support which Timex workers had given miners during the national strikes of 1972 and 1974.⁶⁴

Figure 2 shows that the occupiers used placards and banners to reinforce these moral-economy sentiments. The ownership claims implicit in the 'new management' banner were accompanied by three different wordings of the right to work. 'Geez a job Fred', aimed at Olsen, was a Timex adaptation of 'Giz a job' from *Boys from the Blackstuff*, an influential drama series by Alan Bleasdale about working-class life in recession-hit Liverpool, first shown on BBC2 in 1982.⁶⁵

⁶² *The Scotsman*, 6 April 1983.

⁶³ John Foster and Charles Woolfson, *The Politics of the UCS Work-in: Class Alliances and the Right to Work* (London, 1988).

⁶⁴ STUC, *86th Annual Report*, Rothesay Pavilion, 18-22 April 1983 (Glasgow, 1983), 486-89.

⁶⁵ John Kirk, 'Class, Community and "Structures of Feeling" in Working-class Writing from the 1980s', *Literature and History*, 8, 2 (1999), 44-63.



Figure 2: 'The scene at Milton works at 4 p.m. yesterday', *Courier & Advertiser*, 20 April 1983

The local press continued to use militaristic imagery, referring to the 'Timex war', while government ministers and company executives presented the workers and their trade unions as 'out-dated'.⁶⁶ Fletcher used the motif of union-thwarted modernization in contacts with Ernie Ross and workforce representatives: 'New attitudes', he asserted, 'are required for new industries'. Fletcher was playing on the insecurities of the city and the occupiers' presumed loyalties to workers at the Camperdown plant.⁶⁷ The government and the company relayed a common message: any delay to production tests for Sinclair's flat-screen tubes could lead to his severing of ties with Timex Dundee.⁶⁸ Holding up production on the Sinclair contract in fact enabled the occupiers to exert some pressure on Timex, and they refused to concede ground. Their union representatives counter-attacked, claiming that Timex had already passed the 8,000 blueprints which detailed development work on the pocket TV tube to Besançon.⁶⁹ This injustice reinforced the occupiers' determination to resist. Solidarity from the community in Dundee and support from the broader labour movement also helped. These were 'resources of hope', in the words of Raymond Williams.⁷⁰ Tom Smith remembers the practical assistance lent by the Labour-led local authority, the City of Dundee District Council. Housing rents

⁶⁶ *The People's Journal*, 23 April 1983.

⁶⁷ TNA, PREM 19/1104, Fletcher to James Tinney, Secretary, Joint Union Committee, Timex Corporation Dundee, 29 April 1983, and Fletcher to Ross, 29 April 1983.

⁶⁸ TNA, PREM 19/1104, SEPD Brief for Prime Minister's Questions, 12 April 1983.

⁶⁹ *Courier*, 15 April 1983.

⁷⁰ Raymond Williams, 'Mining the Meaning: Key Words in the Miners' Strike', in Robin Gable (ed.), *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London, 1989), 120–27.

were deferred, and a hundred library books delivered to the occupation. Small businesses supplied food and entertainment, including videos and pool tables.⁷¹

Seeking to find additional points of pressure, Timex management announced 300 additional redundancies, arising from work allegedly lost to the industrial action, and threatened legal action to clear the occupiers from Milton.⁷² Timex wrote to those suspected of being involved at their home addresses on 18 April, threatening withdrawal of redundancy terms that had been issued on 8 April.⁷³ Those willing to accept the terms were instructed to attend the Block 1 Canteen at Milton between at 3p.m. on 19 April. Otherwise their employment would be terminated. Appealing to employees directly in this manner as individuals was a further breach of the moral-economy code, which required negotiation through trade union representatives. The occupiers did not yield and were supported on 19 April by a demonstration of 450 workers at the plant with messages in solidarity received from Ford's factory in Dagenham and Kent coal miners.⁷⁴ Further letters were issued by Timex to the occupiers at their home addresses on 27 and 29 April. These were also generally ignored, despite continuing threats from Fletcher at the Scottish Office and management that they were endangering Timex's operations and the remaining 2,300 jobs in Dundee.⁷⁵ The company then made good its threat of legal action, lodging a petition in the High Court in Edinburgh on 6 May against a total of 349 named individuals, demanding that they leave the Milton premises. Those named in the summons were alerted to this action in letters delivered to their home addresses by taxi at 2 a.m. on the previous morning.⁷⁶ Tom remembers the tensions this caused:

Tom: [...] The only thing that did upset quite a lot of people, and I was one of them, was included, the people that voted to take part in it, and then we got letters at two o'clock in the morning ... delivered by taxis. Just, you know, you're no longer employed and ... that is completely rubbish. And a lot of them, we, we got one, you've to sign if you support the company ... and send it back.

Valerie: The company were trying to get in touch with you ... but without going to the ... trade union.

⁷¹ Interview, Tom and Dave.

⁷² University of Dundee Archive Services (DUA), MS 272, George Mason Collection, copy of all names and address of workers suspected of being involved in the occupation; Peter Hetherington, 'Legal action by Timex to end the factory sit-in', *The Guardian*, 7 May 1983.

⁷³ *Courier*, 20 April 1983

⁷⁴ *Courier*, 19 April 1983

⁷⁵ *Courier*, 28 April 1983 and 9 May 1983.

⁷⁶ *Courier*, 7 May 1983, *the Evening Telegraph and Post*, 6 May 1983.

Tom: Yeah. And there were people playing both sides.

Valerie: Really?

Tom: Yeah. And then I got, not only me, we got presented, they hire it fae the, the court, I've still got it ... wi all the names.

Jim: The petition. I've got a copy of it.

Tom: That's right. So it was just stood at the door and all the names ... so ...

Jim: And addresses as well.

Tom: Yeah it had everything. So that meant if you'd signed saying you were supporting the company ... they didnae put you on that. So ... When they come ... to the door ... So you knew that way. And that broke up quite a few friendships. Because, well, I had three kids. My wife wisnae working. [...] So, ach, you get support fae your family, obviously, and friends. So that hurt a wee bit when you seen people that you thought were, you knew, that you were ... quite close to. Friendship. And they turned their back and they were like, oh but I've got family see. We're all in the same boat. But the people that maintained it, that was, we still see them yet. We're still friends.

Valerie: You've got quite a tight group then.

Tom: Oh yeah.

Valerie: And people who were involved in the sit in ...

Tom: Yeah, very close.⁷⁷

The occupation did not crumble. The company therefore held talks in London on Friday 13 May with union officials, who resolved to maximize the exit terms for their members. All compulsory redundancies were to be withdrawn for a further 90-day period; legal action by Timex to end the occupation would end; and for the redundant workers an interim short-term working arrangement would be instituted, restoring pension and redundancy rights, and first access to vacancies at Camperdown as these arose. The occupiers surprised their union officials by rejecting these initial

⁷⁷ Interview, Tom and Dave.

terms over the weekend by overwhelming majority – only 14 out of 348 were in favour – at a mass meeting, shown in Figure 3.⁷⁸

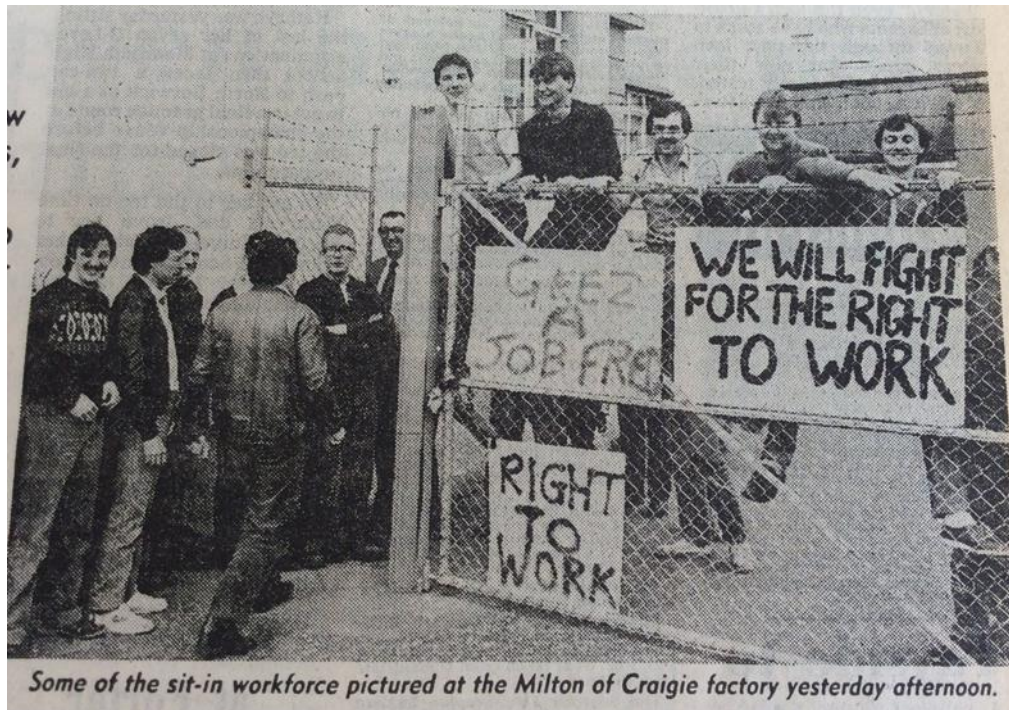


Figure 3: 'Some of the sit-in workforce pictured on the Milton of Craigie factory yesterday afternoon', *Courier & Advertiser*, 17 May 1983

Negotiations resumed locally, with workers securing further improvements: an extension to the short-term working arrangement from 13 to 21 days, and payments for each year of service plus ex-gratia sums at least equivalent to twelve weeks' earnings.⁷⁹ Management also agreed to secure 200 additional redundancies at Camperdown, where women workers had expressed a desire to leave, enabling transfers from Milton. Even although Milton closed and skilled jobs were lost, the occupation was celebrated by the occupying workers (Figure 4). The action had not extended the life of watch-making or skilled engineering employment. But the dignity of the workers affected had been defended and the redundancy terms substantially improved on those available before the occupation. Vice-convenor at Milton, John Kydd, stated:

⁷⁸ *Courier*, 16 May 1983; *The Evening Telegraph and Post*, 16 May 1983.

⁷⁹ *Courier*, 18 May 1983.

Members made redundant and members dismissed have been reinstated with full rights. However this is the loss of another industry in Dundee and we feel this has come about through the lack of Government support. Our negotiations have been successful in changing the interpretation of the London document [the proposed settlement of 13 May] and we now welcome a return to work.⁸⁰



Figure 4: 'All smiles at Timex this afternoon', *Evening Telegraph and Post*, 18 May 1983.

The occupation ended on 20 May. The occupiers left the plant at 8 a.m., piped out by Billy Shields, son of a Milton worker, playing the enduring local anthem 'Bonnie Dundee' (Figure 5). Work recommenced immediately on development of the flat-screen pocket TV tube.

⁸⁰ *Evening Telegraph and Post*, 18 May 1983.



Figure 5: 'The piper in action', *Evening Telegraph and Post*, 19 May 1983.

After the occupation and closure of Milton, Timex completed its conversion to electronics-only operations in Dundee. It concentrated on low-cost production, competing with factories run by other multi-national firms, and its parent firm in Portugal. Some media assessments of the operation's future were upbeat, although the dependence on powerful customers in Sinclair and IBM, supplying circuit boards for its Scottish facility in Greenock, was identified as hazardous in 1984.⁸¹ In October that year Timex proposed 370 further redundancies. These cuts were pushed through, reviving the expressions of workplace injustice in moral economy language. The jettisoned jobs had been supported through publicly-funded research and development. Sinclair was thinking about exporting some of his work to Japan.⁸² Employment continued shrinking, to 1,000 in 1985 and 580 towards the end of 1990. Contract manufacturing for IBM by this point represented some 70 per cent of Timex business. The firm issued its staff with a *Fresh Start Program*. The US English embodied the subaltern status of the Dundee factory.⁸³ This, according to Martin and Dowling, was the 'soft' Human Resource Management face of the firm in the early 1990s, but there was also a 'hard' face, represented by a new chief, Peter Hall. Facing a delay in 1993 orders from IBM, in late December 1992 Hall devised a series of radical cost-saving measures, including a programme of temporary layoffs, a one-year wage freeze and reduced fringe benefits.⁸⁴ The workforce examined the plan with

⁸¹ DCC, Green Box, clipping, Alastair Balfour, 'How Timex stepped back from the brink', *Scottish Business Insider*, May 1984.

⁸² DCC, Green Box, Jim Milne, TASS-AUEW Timex, to Ernie Ross, 10 October 1984.

⁸³ DCC, Green Box, Timex Electronics Corporation Dundee, Scotland, *Fresh Start Program: information booklet* (November 25, 1990), 44 pp.

⁸⁴ Graeme Martin and Martin Dowling, 'Managing Change, Human Resource Management and Timex', *Journal of Strategic Change*, 4 (1995), 77-94, with material here at 84-5.

union representatives and resolved to resist it. A strike commenced on 29 January 1993.⁸⁵ Hall and two other Timex executives met Harry McLevy, now area officer of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), along with two factory representatives, John Kydd junior and Gordon Samson, veterans of the occupation both, in the city's Invercarse Hotel on 10 February. Kydd later concluded that Hall was negotiating in bad faith because the real Timex objective was union de-recognition. This perspective emerged in a hearing of the House of Commons Employment Committee, taking evidence from Timex management, including Hall, and union representatives in the final week of April.⁸⁶ Samson's notes from the Invercarse negotiations are consistent with union as well as Timex evidence to the Employment Committee.⁸⁷ Stewards would concede a six-month wage freeze but wanted a share in devising the lay-offs, favouring a work-sharing programme that would prevent compulsory redundancy. Hall refused, determined to exert complete total control over the lay-offs, enforce a twelve-month wage freeze and a 15 per cent cut in fringe benefits.⁸⁸ Reluctantly, to avoid mass-redundancy, the 340 workers affected accepted Hall's plan 'under protest', but they were dismissed anyway.⁸⁹

A bitter lock-out ensued, as Timex bussed in a substitute non-union workforce. The dismissed workers picketed daily and campaigned with the support of sections of the labour movement for their reinstatement. In April and June 1993 there were major marches and rallies, with speeches and big crowds of sacked workers and supporters in Camperdown Park, a few hundred metres from the factory. The campaign was strongly feminist, emphasizing the distinct position of women in Timex and Dundee. The loss of relatively well-paid manual jobs was experienced in highly negative terms by women less able to travel further distances for alternative industrial work.⁹⁰ Some who were involved assert that their difficulties were partly the making of male shop stewards, including those transferred to Camperdown from Milton, who had 'moved in and [...] started tae take over'.⁹¹ Jean, an activist in the 1993 dispute, regretted the decision to strike. This placed the workforce outside the factory, reducing their capacity to defend their jobs or secure enhanced exit terms:

⁸⁵ DUA, MSS 272/2, Peter W. Hall, President, Timex Electronics Corporation, to George Mason, 5 February 1993.

⁸⁶ DUA, MSS 272/2, House of Commons, Session 1992-93, Employment Committee, *The Operation of Employment Legislation Governing Industrial Disputes. Minutes of Evidence*, Wednesday 28 April 1993, 15.

⁸⁷ DUA, Commons Employment Committee, *Minutes of Evidence*, 28 April 1993, 20-23, 33.

⁸⁸ DCC, Green Box, Gordon Samson's Note, Invercarse Hotel, Timex, 10 February 1993.

⁸⁹ Peter Hetherington, 'Timex job fight turns clock back to 1980s', *The Guardian*, 3 March 1993.

⁹⁰ DCC, Green Box, *Timex Workers' Bulletin*, 1 (April 1993); *Scottish Socialist Movement*, 9 (June/July 1993); Maria Fyffe to Ernie Ross, 16 March 1993.

⁹¹ Bozdog, *Generation ZX(X)*, Clip 28.

Valerie: And you think it was a mistake to go out?

Jean: Oh God, aye. That's what they were after. Aye, so we lost a lot of ... we could have fought for a better redundancy. See even they would have done that, we could have ... got a lot more than what we did get.⁹²

The dispute attained UK-wide political and media attention. *The Guardian* claimed it was the biggest lock-out since Rupert Murdoch had moved his News International titles from the Fleet Street quarter of central London to Wapping in the East End in 1986.⁹³ This comparison was hyperbolic. Murdoch had dispensed with 5,500 unionized print workers.⁹⁴ The 340 sacked by Hall represented a fraction of this number, and likewise amounted to just one-eighteenth of those employed in Dundee by Timex in 1974 or one-sixth of the jobs lost at Milton in 1983. Such misconception was commonplace in the chronicling of deindustrialization: closures and opposition to closures were visible and attracted attention; but much greater job losses were incurred through attrition. In Scotland the peak level of employment in firms that ceased trading or moved entirely offshore after 1979 had usually been passed ten or even fifteen years earlier.⁹⁵

The 1993 lockout at Timex was nevertheless a transformative event for those involved. Workers with personal reservations, like Jean, accepted the collective decision and actively supported the strike. Hall resigned in June, triggering hopes of reinstatement, but Timex quickly moved to an announcement that the plant would close in August.⁹⁶ The personal and collective difficulty of this enforced departure was compounded for many by subsequent experience. Jean and other former Camperdown women who have been interviewed in life-course formats report that Timex provided them with their most satisfying and secure employment. The solidarity of the factory contrasted markedly with the precariousness and frequent isolation of the private-sector service work that followed.⁹⁷ Recrimination punctuates the memories of these women:

⁹² Interview, Jean.

⁹³ 'Clocked Off', *The Guardian, Weekend Magazine*, 29 May 1993, 7-9.

⁹⁴ Linda Melvern, *The End of the Street* (London, 1986); Peter Bain, 'The 1986-7 News International Dispute: Was the Workers' Defeat Inevitable?', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 5 (Spring 1998), 73-105.

⁹⁵ Hood and Young, *Multinationals in Retreat*, pp. 106-113.

⁹⁶ Seamus Milne and Edward Pilkington, 'Timex workers vote for fight to continue', *The Guardian*, 4 June 1993; and Erlend Clouston, 'Timex closes dispute factory ahead of schedule', *The Guardian*, 30 August 1993.

⁹⁷ Bozdog, *Generation ZX(X)*, Clip 5

Ah think that's why we're so bitter about people goin in and workin on our jobs, and people sayin 'well they've got families'. Well we had families too. And a lot of people that were out on strike didn't have men at thir backs to look after them. [...] A lot o them, young ones wae kids and everythin were maybe one parent family, they didn't have anything. I think that's why I'm ... ay ... I'm bitter. And it's never sorta eased. I'm still angry.⁹⁸

The severity of this loss, coupled with the high profile and acrimony of the Camperdown lock-out, has conditioned an important curiosity of collective memory. The ending in 1993 eclipses the crisis of 1983. In 1995 *On the Line*, written by Alan Spence and John Carnegie, was staged at the Rep Theatre in Dundee. This focused entirely on the 1993 strike and its immediate aftermath. The 1983 occupation was ignored. Milton appeared only in conjunction with the 'militants' who 'took over' at Camperdown and compelled the women to strike.⁹⁹ This was an ambiguous presentation of female agency, presenting 'strong' women as unwitting victims. Assertions of male trade-union incompetence and/or bad faith have continued to characterize narratives of former Camperdown workers in the intervening years.¹⁰⁰ Media coverage in the 2010s included some acknowledgement of the longer history, noting the establishment and expansion of the factories in Dundee, but even this glossed over the occupation to showcase the strike and closure in 1993.¹⁰¹ This one-dimensional history was reprised in the *Rise and Fall of Timex in Dundee*, a documentary broadcast on BBC Scotland in October 2019. Dozens of former workers were interviewed in the making of the programme, including Tom Smith and other male engineers. Roughly two-thirds of the one-hour programme was absorbed by 1993, and no use was made of the testimonies of the male engineers who had spoken to camera about the longer history of production and employment at Timex.¹⁰²

The image of women on the assembly lines and then on strike fitted popular conceptions of Dundee as an intensive centre of female industrial employment. This is the legacy of Dundee's peculiar history of industrialization.¹⁰³ Dundee women had a tradition of spirited protest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the jute industry. This involved challenging the

⁹⁸ Bozdog, *Generation ZX(X)*, Clip 30.

⁹⁹ Alan Spence and John Carnegie, 'On the Line', unpublished draft scripts, 1995. Also see Dundee Rep Theatre, *Programme*, 'On the Line, A Celebration of Timex in Dundee', Tuesday 9 – Saturday 27 April 1996, 'A Timex Chronology'.

¹⁰⁰ Bozdog, *Generation ZX(X)*, Clip 8-38.

¹⁰¹ 'The good, the bad and the Timex: A factory of the future... until tough times hit', *Evening Telegraph*, 28 August 2015; 'Remembering the Timex factory dispute', *The Scotsman*, 19 January 2013.

¹⁰² *The Rise and Fall of Timex Dundee*, BBC Scotland, first broadcast 19 October 2019; information from Tom Smith in conversation with Jim Phillips.

¹⁰³ Valerie Wright, 'Juteopolis and After'.

patriarchal authority of the mill owners as well as their male supervisors and work-mates. Media narratives relating to Timex since the 1990s have routinely drawn on these representations of Dundee women workers and the city's presumed historical status as a 'women's town' or 'she town'.¹⁰⁴ The low profile of the 1983 occupation is nevertheless problematic. It was more important than the 1993 lock-out in terms of scale and character. Skilled jobs were vital to families and communities in the city in the early 1980s as well as the men who confronted redundancy. The loss of 2,000 engineering jobs, in a union-regulated workplace, was keenly felt. The quality of work throughout Scotland was rapidly dissipating with increased industrial closures and, for those firms remaining, diversification into lower paid sub-contracting. The fight for the 'right to work' in 1983 was therefore politically important, a restatement of the working-class moral economy that was under assault from employers and policy-makers. Tom's words offer a powerful summation:

We sat in. And while we kept it, you could argue that till the end of time ... whether it did help or it didnae help. Everybody's got their own view of it. And I think at least it was something. Even if it was something fae yourself to say 'well at least I fought. I didnae just lie doon and get stamped on'.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

The 1983 occupation at the Timex Milton plant in Dundee was a moral-economy defence of employment in a period of accelerating deindustrialization. It was unsuccessful in that the employer realized its aims of closing the plant and ending watch-making in Dundee. But if different criteria are applied the occupation can be termed successful in very difficult circumstances. Trade-union consultation rights and the economic security of the workforce was protected. There were no compulsory redundancies, which Timex had tried to enforce. Milton workers who wanted to stay with Timex were able to move to Camperdown as a result of the agreement which brought the occupation to an end. At Camperdown union rights remained intact, despite an apparent attempt by management to use the crisis as a mechanism for ending the closed shop there.

The closure of Milton was nevertheless a serious episode with lasting consequences in Dundee. The working-class moral economy of post-1945 Scotland was shaped by pressure on policy-

¹⁰⁴ Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland, 1850-1914* (Oxford, 1991), 142; Emma Wainwright, 'Constructing Gendered Workplace 'Types': The weaver-millworker distinction in Dundee's jute industry, c. 1880-1910', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 14, 4 (2007), 467-82.

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Tom and Dave.

makers to stimulate employment alternatives in older industrial localities. In Dundee this involved for many an exchange of work in jute and shipbuilding for engineering firms with a focus on consumer goods. Dundonians accepted this restructuring in moral-economy terms: the changes were managed carefully, and the new sectors offered substantial improvement in employment conditions and rewards. Several generations of families worked in 'the Timex'. The switch away from watch-making by Timex contravened this moral economy. Removing goods from Dundee that would be manufactured elsewhere was seen by workers as betrayal of social trust and theft of public property. This explains the sense of injustice among Milton workers and their willingness to resist. After the occupation and closure of Milton the employment position at Camperdown gradually became less attractive. The policy-making environment had changed. The Conservative government elected in 1979 was ideologically opposed to the type and volume of state support for industry pursued by predecessors. Timex could act without reference to the obligations which it had acquired to the workers and people of Dundee. At the start of 1993 the dwindling band of employees at Camperdown were expected to put the profits of their employer before their own rights as workers. The subsequent dispute and then withdrawal of Timex from the city came to dominate popular memory. It is therefore important to remember the occupation of Milton in 1983. It was a brave and dignified defence of the moral economy which had raised the status of working-class people in Dundee and Scotland since the 1950s, improving living standards and social conditions. The occupiers were not clinging to a 'declining' industry or 'outdated' working practices, as Conservative government ministers claimed, but defending the timeless and inalienable rights of workers to collective voice and economic security.